

Islam in Russia: Challenge or Opportunity

Juan Carlos Antunez Moreno

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Marlene Laruelle

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por Juan Carlos Antunez

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'...Islam is rightly claimed an inalienable part of today's religious, social and cultural life of Russia. Its traditions are based on eternal values of goodness, mercy and justice...'

President Vladimir Putin[1]

According to the 2010 census, ethnic Russians accounts for 77.7 percent of 142.3 million estimated Russian population[2]. The image of Russia in the world is rarely associated with Islam and Islamic identity, in general. While Orthodox Christianity is the country's predominant confession, not many know that Russia is home to as many as 20 million Muslims of various ethnic backgrounds. Russian leaders and politicians repeatedly stress the significance of Islam as integral to the political fabric of statehood, historically and in the contemporary era[3]. Islam in Russia is a complex, transversal and multidimensional issue and its growing importance in Russia will shape the future of the country in at least five main directions: the overall demographic balance of the country; the strategy of 'normalizing' the regions of the North Caucasus; Russia's migration policy; Russia's positioning on the international scene; and the transformation of Russian national identity[4]. This article examines the current role of Islam in Russian society, focusing on its role in Moscow internal and external policies and paying special attention to issues such as Muslims demographics, immigration, different streams in Russian Islam and the threat of terrorism.

The role of religion in Russian internal politics

Russian nationalism began to rise along with the spread of the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)[5]. Russia today is still in the process of leaving the ideological vacuum that resulted from the Soviet Union's collapse. What is emerging

in its stead is a selective puzzle of the past that mixes Orthodox imagery with Soviet triumphalism, combined with an increasingly inward-looking nationalism[6].

When President Vladimir Putin came to power he realized the potential of the ROC, which shared his views of Russia's role in the world, and began to work toward strengthening its role in Russia[7], home of the world's largest Orthodox community (officially numbered at some 100 million believers). The patriarch of Moscow, Archbishop Kirill, and Russian President Vladimir Putin, Russia has in recent years cemented an alliance for the pursuit of common values at home and abroad[8]. These shared values can be characterized as openly traditionalist, conservative, anti-Western and anti-globalist[9].

President Vladimir Putin and the ROC share a sacralised vision of Russian national identity and exceptionalism. According to their vision, Russia is neither Western nor Asian, but rather a unique society representing a unique set of values which are believed to be divinely inspired. The Kremlin's chief ideologue in this regard is Alexander Dugin. Dugin's ideology is anti-Western, anti-liberal, totalitarian, "ideocratic", and socially traditional. And it labels rationalism as Western and thus promotes a mystical, spiritual, emotional, and messianic worldview[10].

Moreover, Moscow views the ROC as a reserve diplomatic channel[11]. In 2007, the Kremlin established the *Russkiy Mir* (Russian World) Foundation, embarking on a concerted soft-power campaign to promote Russian language and culture beyond the country's borders[12]. For many analysts the term *Russkiy Mir*, exemplifies an expansionist and messianic Russian foreign policy, the intersection of the interests of the Russian state and the ROC[13]. The project initially focused on promoting closer political and economic ties with Russian speakers in the former Soviet republics, but it soon came to incorporate a worldview constructed in opposition to the West[14].

Although there is clearly a great deal of overlap between the religious and political uses of the *Russkiy Mir* concept, there are some differences. As used by the state, *Russkiy Mir* is typically a political or a cultural idea. In both senses it is used by groups working for the Russian government to strengthen the country's domestic stability, restore Russia's status as a world power, and increase her influence in neighbouring states. As used by the Church, *Russkiy Mir* is a religious concept. It is essential for reversing the secularization of society throughout the former Soviet Union; a task Patriarch Kirill has termed the "second Christianization" of Rus[15]. The ROC opposes the societies built on the values of "traditional religions" (i.e. Islam and Orthodox — "true" — Christianity) and the spiritless (and, seemingly, non-Christian) secular liberalism-based Western societies[16].

In their symbiotic relation, the ROC is publicly conflating the mission of the Russian state under President Vladimir Putin's leadership with the mission of the Church, sacralising the Russian national identity[17]. Russian government leans on the church to provide it historical and cultural legitimacy, and the church relies on the Kremlin to support its position as a moral arbiter for society[18]. The ROC conservative clerics have given their support to the government's most polarizing recent laws,[19] such as the so-called 2013 LGBT propaganda law, the 2012 Foreign Agents Law, the 2013 Law Protecting Religious Feelings, and the 2015 Undesirable Organizations Law [1], which seriously limited freedom of speech and hobbled civil

society. Since the first large-scale anti-regime protests in 2011, the regime placed new urgency on describing oppositionists as “a treacherous fifth column corrupted by their embrace of permissive Western attitudes and money from foreign donors”[20]. In May 2016 the head of the ROC, Patriarch Kirill, had already made clear his sentiments toward the constitutionally protected concept of human rights when he condemned what he called the “heresy” of some human rights[21]. The ROC and the state now unite in violation of the Constitution. The establishment of the ROC is gradually taking on some functions of the state, and the security arm of the state is protecting the Orthodox establishment.

Stunned by the 2011 mainly middle-class, largely pro-Western protests, the Kremlin turned to Russia’s more conservative, more xenophobic heartland for support[22]. The ROC played a key role in this move both, playing an increasingly significant role in representing the interests of Russia abroad and justifying its increasingly conservative agenda at home[23].

In Russia, Orthodox Christianity is enjoying a revival after 70 years of communist repression. The ROC is aiming to restore moral and cultural values and overcome modernization's effects on post-Soviet Russian society. The ROC’s role is especially crucial given that cultural and political power seem intertwined in modern Russia. Muslims are also an important force in Russia and the ROC Russian Orthodox Church has had a successful relationship with Islam, dating back over 700 years, but current problems between the two religions are fed by more recent phenomena. These include Orthodox fears of Islamic extremism and renewed notions of an Islamic-Christian struggle, which first emerged from the Soviet war in Afghanistan and then from the regional struggles following the collapse of the Soviet Union[24].



After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a process of religious revitalization took place among both Orthodox Christians and Russian Muslims. The Kremlin has so far failed to take into account the needs and aspirations of the Muslim minority, which has led to some political upheaval. In fact, the Russian state has been in conflict with

nationalists from several Muslim majority areas for over two decades. Growing Russian and Muslim nationalism has led to religious politicization, and Russian policymakers have yet to seriously tackle this issue[25]. One of the main challenges facing Russia is its relationship with Islam, both on the internal front and in foreign policy[26].

Russia's rulers have always had loyal Muslim communities under their authority, not only on the empire's southern rim but in the heart of European Russia. Agreements between Moscow and Muslim spiritual leaders supported these relationships and they were generally respected. Things are not so different now. In charge of Muslim believers there is a "Russo-Islamic" establishment which cultivates cordial relations with officialdom, as well as with the ROC[27]. The Russian constitution states the country is secular without a state religion, and all religious associations are equal and separate from the state. However, the law acknowledges Islam as one of the country's four "traditional" religions (beside Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism), constituting an inseparable part of the country's historical heritage^[28]. The central and provincial *muftiates* are on good terms with the Kremlin and the regional leadership. The Russian government assists Muslim institutions by financing some educational and cultural developments. There are no Muslim political parties in Russia, but Muslims are integrated into Russian political life. Some of them have even occupied ministerial positions in the Russian government. In republics with a Muslim majority, especially in the Northern Caucasus, major posts in the government structure and industry are largely occupied by ethnic Muslims. There have been officially appointed Muslim chaplains in some parts of the Russian army in the Northern Caucasus and abroad. In some places local imams pay occasional visits to the armed forces, and Muslim religious representatives are often invited to new soldiers' swearing-in ceremonies. Some private hospitals have prayer rooms for Muslims patients and staff. Some prisons have mosques and prayer houses with regular imams. The Muslim religious festivals *'Id al-Adha (Qurban Bayram)* and *'Id al-Fitr (Uraza Bayram)* are public holidays in almost all the predominantly Muslim republics. Muslims living in other regions can usually take a day off work, provided they make up their absence later. The Russian president officially congratulates Muslim citizens at their religious festivals every year[29].

President Vladimir Putin has even expressed that Orthodox Christianity, his own faith, was closer to Islam than to Roman Catholicism. In a speech ^[2] in Malaysia in 2003, he stressed that Russia was historically "intertwined with the Islamic world", and gained observer status for his country at the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation[30]. In 2013, President Vladimir Putin also showed his desire to determine, clearer than before, the place of Islam in the life of the state and society[31].

The stability in some areas of the country will depend more on whether Moscow keeps trying to control how Russia's Muslim citizens interpret Islamic tradition by mandating which religious authorities and practices are sufficiently patriotic and compatible with the state. The Kremlin has worked especially hard to co-opt Muslims for its own political goals, both foreign and domestic. The key question today, however, is how Moscow will continue to manage its varied Muslim population and whether it can maintain the allegiances of such a diverse group[32].

The Russian authorities, while strictly observing developments inside the Muslim communities (and intervening when necessary), are trying to keep their Muslims content and prevent national strife ("Islamophobia"). But they face the growing xenophobia promoted by the Russian far right, and popular opinion in general ("Russia for the Russians")[\[33\]](#).

Social processes have deeply altered the modalities of identity belonging. Two apparently contradictory phenomena are notable. On the one hand, the identification of ethnic Russians (who represent 80 percent of the population), a formerly rather vague and ill-defined category, is crystallizing around anti-migration themes; the feeling of having to defend a "white" ethnic identity under threat is taking hold, in the same way that we see happening in Western Europe with the success of far right and populist parties[\[34\]](#). On the other hand, religious identities are being reasserted. Not only do 80 percent of Russian citizens claim to be Orthodox (in the sense of asserting an identity affiliation rather than practicing it), but Islam is also brandished more and more openly as a major criterion of identification for North Caucasians and peoples of the Volga-Urals. Faced with this Islamic identification, Islamophobia, which has been historically absent from Russia, is today clearly emerging. Consequently, as in many other countries in Europe, fear of migrants and fear of Islam are steadily merging. The same process of revitalized religious identity is also notable among Central Asian migrants[\[35\]](#).

Furthermore, Muslims have turned increasingly toward Islam out of frustration with the Kremlin's policies which have failed to improve their social and economic conditions. However, separatists represent a small minority of Russian Muslims[\[36\]](#). Russian attitudes towards its Muslim minorities are full of contradictions. Moscow insists on absolute loyalty on the part of its Muslim citizens, but cannot and does not want to fulfil many of the demands of even the more moderate elements among the Muslims. This refers above all to the Muslim republics on the middle Volga such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan. Nevertheless (or because of it), they have made growing political and economic demands of Moscow[\[37\]](#).

Yet, at the regional and local level, relationships to Islam vary considerably. In traditionally Muslim regions, references to Islam are an integral part of public life, and all local leaders attempt to position themselves as supporters of traditional Islam. However, in regions where Islam is only visible through the activities of migrants, tensions are noticeable and on the rise[\[38\]](#).

Given forthcoming demographic changes, by around 2050 Muslims may represent between one third (according to the most conservative estimates) and one half (according to the most 'alarmist' assessments) of the Russian population. The 'rising number of citizens self-referring to Islam—will impact both Russia's domestic situation and its foreign policy options in the medium and long term[\[39\]](#).

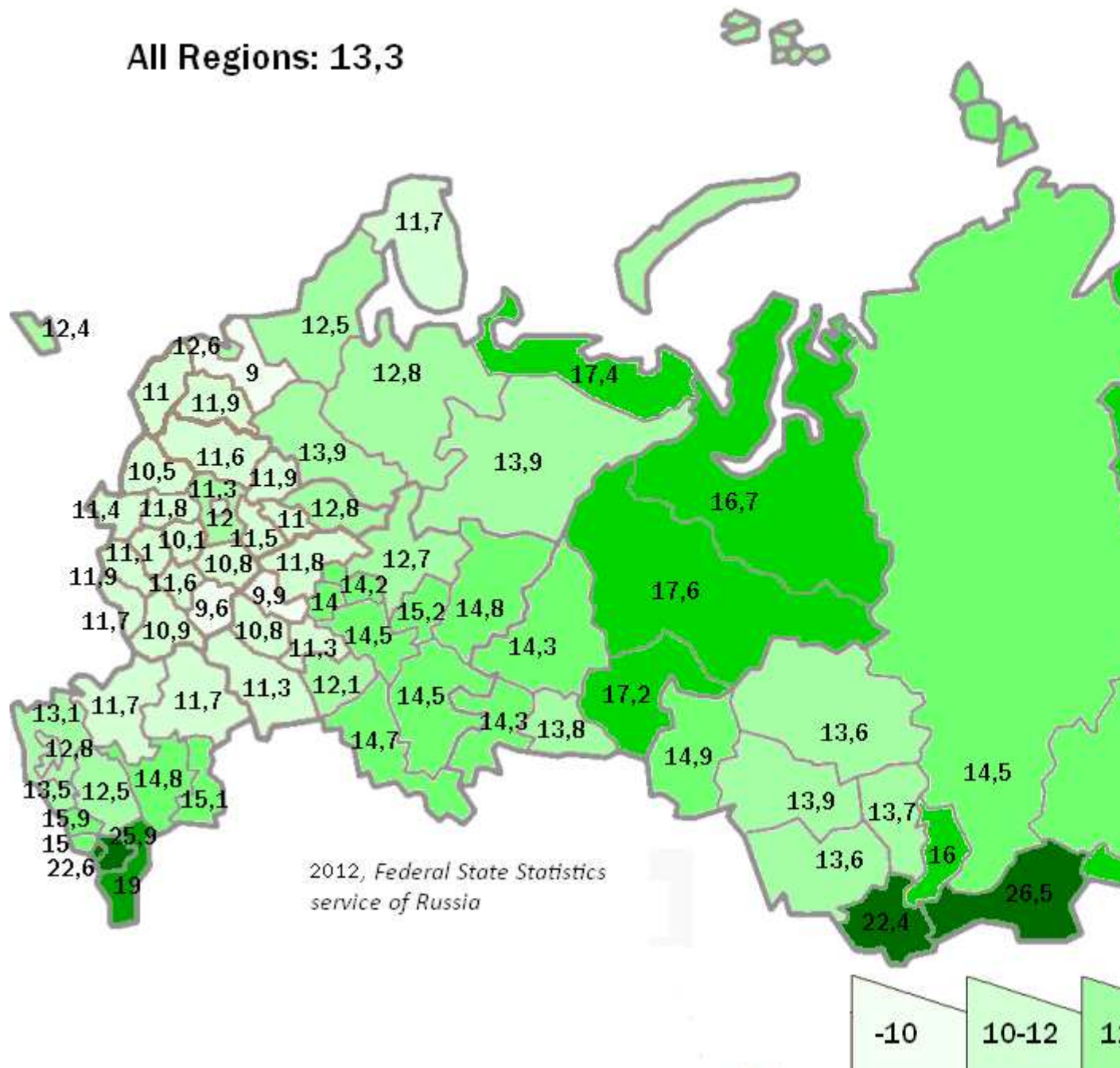
Immigration and Russian demographic challenges, the diversity of Russian Islam, and the threat of terrorism are factors that severely affect the relation between the Russian state and the Muslim community. Following chapters of this article focus on these issues.

Russia's Muslim demographics: it's impact on Russian internal cohesion

The U.S. government estimates Russian population at 142.3 million (July 2016 estimate)^[40]. Nearly 200 hundred groups are represented in 2010 census, with ethnic Russians accounting for 77.7 percent, Tatars 3.7 percent, Ukrainians 1.4 percent, Bashkirs 1.1 percent, Chechens 1 percent, others 10.2 percent, and unspecified people for 3.9 percent^[41]. There is no official record of the number of Muslims in the Russian Federation as the 2010 census did not include a question about religious beliefs. However, according to this census, the total number of members of majoritarian Muslim ethnic groups indigenous to Russia is about 15 million, and there are significant numbers of labour migrants from central Asian states, mainly Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, whose expatriates form a significant portion of the approximately eleven million (both, officially registered and illegal) labour migrants in Russia^[42]. The final figure of Muslims in Russia probably reaches some 20 million people^[43]. This is exactly what Muslim spiritual leaders^[44] and Russian politicians, including President Vladimir Putin, usually cite^[45].

The figure of Muslims in Russia, including legal and illegal immigrants reaches some 20 million people. Based on this data, it is possible to assess that Russia has the largest minority Muslim population in all of Europe. Furthermore, the number of legally registered Muslims in Russia is projected to increase from about 16.4 million in 2010 to about 18.6 million in 2030. The Muslim share of the country's population is expected to increase from 11.7 percent in 2010 to 14.4 percent in 2030^[46]. The growth rate for the Muslim population in the Russian Federation is projected to be 0.6 percent annually over the next two decades. By contrast, Russia's non-Muslim population is expected to shrink by an average of 0.6 percent annually over the same 20-year period.^[47]

Birth Rates in Russia, 2012 (Per 1



Several factors contribute to the projected growth of Russia's Muslim population. For instance, Muslim women generally have more children than other women in Russia. Higher Muslim fertility is directly related to the fact that Muslim women marry in larger numbers and divorce less often than other women in Russia. This means they spend longer periods of their lives in unions where childbearing is more likely. And although the abortion rate in Russia is still among the highest in the world, research suggests that Muslim women have fewer abortions on average than other women in

Russia.^[48] These factors, together with the minor impact of alcoholism, drugs and HIV on the Russian Muslim population, assure the projected growth of Russia's Muslim population^[49].

Another reason the Muslim population in Russia is expected to increase is that nearly half of the country's Muslims are under age 30, according to an analysis of data from Russia's 2002 census. By comparison, about 40 percent of ethnic Russians are in this age group. Nearly a quarter of Russia's Muslims (22.8 percent) are under age 15, compared with roughly one-in-six ethnic Russians (15.9 percent).^[50]

The majority of indigenous Islamic populations in Russia have grown since the fall of the Soviet Union. Some of this growth could stem from the return to their homelands of Muslims who were relocated under Josef Stalin, but there has also been a notable increase in key Islamic populations just in the past decade: The Chechen population has risen 5 percent and the Dagestani population has increased by 13 percent. This is a concern for the ethnic Russians, who consider these populations hostile. In contrast, the more "Russified" Tatar population is in decline, much like the ethnic Russian population^[51].

Experts have noted that population declines are being observed in regions with predominantly Russian, Orthodox inhabitants. Regions where populations are stable or increasing include national autonomous republics with a high share of the Muslim citizens and low numbers of ethnic Russians, as well as the Tyumen region and Moscow, where growth has been achieved as a result of immigration and higher living standards. A neat illustration of this is the fact that migrants now account for a third of all births in Moscow^[52].

The number of Muslim immigrants in Russia is also rising. According to official state data, some 240,000 immigrants enter Russia annually — Russia's Centre for Migration Studies puts this number at more than 400,000 after accounting for illegal immigration. Federal Migration Service head Konstantin Romodanovsky has stated that about 3 million immigrants are believed to be in Russia illegally.^[53]

In 2030, Russia's population could fall to 120–130 million people, which would have significant consequences in terms of labour, pension funding, and securing areas near more populous neighbours such as China—that is, mostly in the Far East. Despite a modest demographic recovery, the outlook remains gloomy. Indeed, this rebound is primarily due to the naturalization of some immigrants and the arrival of more numerous age groups. Moreover, the only way for Russia to maintain its population level at around 130 million inhabitants in the forthcoming three decades—an already optimistic scenario—will be to accelerate the process of legal naturalization of migrants at a rapid pace^[54].

The United Nations estimates that 11 million immigrants are in Russia. Currently, Russia is second in the world in terms of its absolute volume of immigration, lagging only behind the US^[55]. Russian immigration officials say most of the immigrants come from impoverished former Soviet republics in Central Asia such as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Russia has bilateral agreements on visa-free travel with these countries. Although immigrants from these majority Muslim states do not need

visas to reside in Russia, they must obtain work permits before taking up employment. Some 75 percent of all immigrants in Russia hail from former Soviet republics, and many others come from countries with strong traditional ties to Moscow such as Vietnam and Afghanistan.^[56] A 2013 survey by VTsIOM, a state-owned pollster, found that almost one in seven Russians don't want Muslim neighbours, one quarter do not want to live near a Caucasus native, and 28 percent don't want Central Asians next door. Some 45 percent of Russians support the nationalist slogan of "Russia for ethnic Russians," the poll found^[57].

If migration continues to occur at its current pace, the number of Russian Muslims from Central Asia will outnumber the number of ethnic Russian Muslims, exceeding the combined populations of the Ural-Volga, Crimean Tatar and North Caucasus regions. Even today, in some Russian cities, Uzbeks, Tajiks and Kyrgyz make up a larger proportion of the mosque going community than indigenous Russian Muslims^[58].

The government's policies toward migrants have been contradictory in the past. Laws in 1993 loosened the requirements for immigration into Russia, while reforms in 2003 made immigration laws stricter. In 2006, these more stringent policies were softened to allow more workers into Russia after Moscow realized the country was experiencing a population crisis. The demographic shift is changing the social landscape in Russia, where the ethnic Russian population has been the centrepiece of social policy for hundreds of years. The Kremlin is attempting to develop a way to incorporate a multi-ethnic and -religious population (with a heavy emphasis on Islam) into its new policies^[59].

Islam has always been the second biggest religion in Russia, but it had never been as visible in Moscow as it is now. Though population estimates vary widely, some sources indicate that Moscow is home to nearly 4 million Muslims, who long ago exceeded the capacity of the city's mosques^[60]. In July 2015 Moscow had only six Mosques, hence the necessity for worshippers to congregate in the street. However, attempts to build new ones are met with protests and rallies^[61]. Despite of this opposition, in September 2015, an elaborate ceremony marked the opening of a mosque that promises to be the grandest in Europe. The event took on special meaning for many of the Russian capital's Muslim residents. And for all of the xenophobia and racism that Russia's Muslims are often confronted with on the streets of Moscow and in Russian media, the celebration of the mosque's opening was a priority for Russia's political elites^[62].

Increased anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiment has accompanied demographic changes. A poll in July 2014 said 65 percent of Russians believe immigrants and immigrant-related crime top terrorism and Western influence as the biggest security threat to their country. A January 2011 poll suggested that 55 percent of Russians reported feelings of enmity toward other ethnicities, and 63 percent believed that Russians should have more rights than other ethnicities.^[63] At the popular level, there is widespread xenophobia against labour migrants, who mostly come from nominally Muslim populations^[64].

The presence of large numbers of immigrants, many of whom speak Russian poorly, has stoked social unrest. Crime has played a large role in increasing tensions. In

2014 police investigators said immigrants were responsible for about 20 percent of all homicides in Moscow the previous year and just over 40 percent of all rapes.[65]

Relations are also tense in Moscow and other large cities between ethnic Russians and "internal migrants" from mainly Muslim republics such as Chechnya, in the volatile North Caucasus region.[66]

The Russian government has been struggling to devise a way to bring all Russian ethnicities under one national identity — much like the Soviets did under the concept of Soviet nationality. With no actual plan on how to counter rising Russian nationalism at a time of demographic changes, it is unclear if the Kremlin can come up with an effective policy to implement[67].

The danger of growing anti-Islamic sentiment is that it threatens to push Russian Muslims further outside the mainstream and into the arms of radicals. Because of the Soviet legacy of religious repression, the majority of people living in Russia with Muslim backgrounds are largely secular -- attached to Islam mostly as part of their ethnic identity. With interest in Islam surging, it also leaves them open to being influenced by extremist ideas. [68]

The Russian government faces several problems with tensions stemming from these demographic trends [3]. Early in his tenure, Russian President Vladimir Putin exploited ethnic Russian xenophobia of the Muslim populations. But now that the Muslim populations have become larger and have moved from the borderlands into Russia's interior, the Kremlin is having more difficulties balancing the interests of all its constituencies. In the lead-up to the 2011 elections, Russia saw protests of more than 100,000 in the streets of Moscow calling for immigration reform and a cessation of government subsidization for the Russian Muslim republics.[69] With about 50 percent of all Russians professing nationalist and anti-immigration views in opinion polls, calls for the introduction of a visa regime with former Soviet republics have been growing. But Russian President Vladimir Putin has opposed such a move.[70]

According to Levada Center surveys, 70 percent of Russians — the highest percentage seen in a decade — want stricter immigration rules. Notably, of those polled, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Moldovans were not considered non-Russians; xenophobic tendencies focused more on ethnicities that were largely Islamic. Overall, social tensions between ethnically Russian and non-Russian populations (particularly Islamic) are on the rise[71].

Rampant Islamophobia, however, shows up in much more than more opinion polls and hate crime statistics. The world of social media has been developing quickly in Russia over the last decade, and nationalist groups of all ideological persuasions are heavily involved in it[72].

Ethnic Russians fear their country is losing its traditional identity; Muslims are offended by widespread discrimination and a lack of respect for their faith. Most Muslims living in Russia are not immigrants, but the indigenous people of lands long ago seized by the expanding Russian empire. And Islam is recognized as one of Russia's official religions, along with Orthodox Christianity, Judaism and Buddhism.

But few nationalists make a distinction between immigrants from former Soviet countries and non-Slavic Russian citizens^[73].

Currently, there are no effective institutions for the integration of migrants from Central Asia into the Muslim space of the Russian Federation. Integration of migrants is a problem of enormous complexity, considering the low level of elementary political and administrative culture in the Muslim community, lack of a Russian all-Muslim ideological platform and lack of experience and appropriate personnel, as well as the existence of huge numbers of internal conflicts. There is also an increasingly common problem posed by those who are hostile to Muslim intents to build mosques in Russian cities. They also frequently try and suppress Islamic activity, including youth and migrant work, using federal power and administrative resources^[74].

Drawing connections between labour migrants and the spread of Islamic radicalism are mainstream in the Russian media, and even at the level of institutions such as the Federal Service of Migration and law enforcement agencies^[75].

The Russian government can no longer afford to exploit differences or ignore divisions. It must now adjust its policies for managing social sentiment. As it does so, it will encounter a few dilemmas. One dilemma involves finding a way for ethnic Russians to differentiate indigenous Muslims from immigrant Muslims. Most Russians lump any non-ethnic Russians together, so a rise in Russian nationalism really means a rise in Russian ethnic nationalism. A second dilemma the Kremlin will encounter is the need for increased immigration when its population is in decline. As the population of ethnic Russians shrinks, there is a pressing need to augment the labour force, and immigrants are an effective way to do so. The problem for the Kremlin is that even if migrants fill low-skilled and low-paying jobs at a time when many ethnic Russians are rising to create a middle class, 53 percent of Russians do not see immigration as a solution to the country's demographic problems^[76].

However, according to recent reports, incidents involving Muslim immigrants occur now relatively infrequently, and often involve internal migrants from Russia's North Caucasus rather than immigrants from Central Asia and Azerbaijan. Though not without significant difficulties, Muslim migrants are integrating into Russian society. In addition, their number has stabilized and even decreased over the last year to about 3.5 million people. The question now is how to maintain this relative stability. A conflict could flare up from some seemingly trivial issue, an everyday event or a single episode. The spark could be the shortage of mosques in some cities and the crowding of worshippers during a religious holiday, or unnecessarily rough treatment at the hands of security forces, or an unmotivated ban on religious literature. It could also be prompted by a terrorist attack perpetrated by a lone fanatic or a psychologically unstable person. All of this could easily provoke tension in an individual city or region, and could ignite simmering xenophobic sentiment across the country as a whole and tilt the scales^[77]. Islam is one of the forms of expressing social demands in Muslim regions. This occurs not only in the North Caucasus but also in other regions with a large Muslim population. Religious phobias will have a negative impact on inter-ethnic conflicts^[78].

Islam in Russia: domestic and foreign influences

Islam is one of Russia's four "traditional" religions[79]. The Russian encounter with Islam dates back many centuries. In parts of Russia, Islam appeared on the scene before Christianity[80]. Unlike many European countries, where immigration contributes to the growth of the Muslim population, Russia's Muslims are local people, long-established populations with ethnic traditions reaching centuries back[81]: In 2000, the Muslims of Russia celebrated 14 centuries of Islam on Russian soil[82].

Russia's identity was forged during centuries-long confrontation, coexistence and cooperation with Muslim neighbours. Russians slowly defeated the Golden Horde, a powerful Mongol-Tatar khanate, and then waged countless wars in and against Ottoman Turkey, Iran, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. The Muslims who now live in Russia are mostly the descendants of this historical legacy. Ethnic Tatars, Russia's third largest ethnic group after Slavic Russians and Ukrainians, have lived in Russia for centuries[83].

Muslim populations exist in all of the territorial divisions of the Russian Federation. Yet, ethnic Muslims are predominant in seven out of the twenty-one republics: Bashkortostan and Tatarstan in the Volga-Urals region, and Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan, Kabardino-Balkaria and Karachay-Cherkessia in the Northern Caucasus. Other parts of Russia, including large cities such as Moscow, Nizhniy Novgorod and St Petersburg, also have significant Muslim populations[84]. Major areas of Muslim concentration in Siberia and the Far East include Omsk, Tyumen, Tobolsk, Novosibirsk, Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, and Urengoi.^[85]



Russia's Muslims belong to more than 40 ethnic groups, such as the Volga Tatars, the Siberian Tatars, Chechens, Ingush, Bashqorts, Dargins, Balkars, Avars, Karachays, Lezgins, Kabardins and many others. The majority of them follow two Sunni schools of Islamic jurisprudence – the Hanafi and Shafi'i *madhhabs*. Muslims of the Volga-Urals region and the Nogais, Karachays and Balkars in the Northern Caucasus follow the Hanafi *madhhab*, while Muslims of Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia are practicing Shafi'i *madhhab*. Shi'ites are a small minority to be found almost exclusively in the Caucasus, among Azeri Turks and part of Dagestan's small Muslim ethnic group, the Lezgins[86]. Sufi Islam was widespread among Russian Muslims, primarily the Naqshbandi order or *tariqat* and the Kadiritarikat, but while Sufi Islam remained strong in the northeast Caucasus, it declined drastically among Volga region Muslims. Sufi Islam of the Naqshbandi, Kadiri, and Shadhili *tariqats* is still widespread today among Muslims in Dagestan, Chechnya, and Ingushetia[87].

After the collapse of the Soviet Union there was a religious revival, which began with Orthodoxy and later embraced Islam[88]. The rise of Islam was accompanied by a rise of nationalist sentiment. Islam quickly became politicized and served as a form of social and political protest. In the early 1990s, Islam began to be used by separatists, especially in Chechnya but not only there. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, new hitherto virtually unknown ideas, including radical ones, flooded Muslim regions of Russia. Russian Muslims became aware of their religious identity and felt part of the global Muslim community or *Ummah*. Finally, whereas the ROC was (and

still is) a centralized institution loyal to the state, several competing religious organizations soon emerged within the Russian Muslim community^[89].

During the rule of Catherine the Great (1762-96) the Central Administration of the Muslims of Russia was created to bring Islam under the direction of the state. Russian Muslims gained official recognition for their clerics and mosques. This system, with some small changes, existed right up until the end of the Soviet Union^[90]. Her government even endorsed Islamic laws in relation to marriage, the family, and public morality. Mullahs and mosque community members frequently turned to the tsarist police to denounce neighbours who committed adultery or failed to attend prayers. Islam became a pillar of a conservative imperial order^[91].

The system has changed greatly in post-Soviet Russia. Formally, Muslim organizations are no longer under state control and have the status of private organizations. The number grew dramatically as nearly every Russian region set up its own board, and some even established two. Today, three main Muslim bodies act as leaders for the others: the Central Muslim Spiritual Board of Russia (CMSB Russia, headed by Grand Mufti Shaykh al-Islam Talgat SafaTajuddin), the Russia Muftis Council (RMC, headed by the Mufti of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Russia, Ravil Gainutdin), and the Coordinating Centre of North Caucasus Muslims (headed by Mufti of the Muslim Spiritual Board of Karachayevo-Cherkessia, Ismail Berdiyev). The first two ones are in constant competition for influence over the Muslim community, with the exception of the North Caucasus, and for the title of the country's main *muftiate*.^[92] Such power struggles are playing out throughout Russia today, with mosque leaders challenging one another for supremacy, hurling charges of extremism and heresy, and appealing to state censors and the police to intervene^[93].

Because Muslims in Russia are part and parcel of the global Islamic community, with all inherent tendencies, including religious radicalism, Islamism, and the desire to create an Islamic state (a territory governed by Sharia law). In particular, religious radicalism has established itself in the post-Soviet space. Furthermore, Islam in Russia cannot be completely obedient to the state, because in this country, as elsewhere in the global Muslim *Ummah*, it is now used for expressing social and political protest against the ruling system unable to protect the interests of the Muslims, ensure social justice and build normal relations with society^[94].

Despite the competition among several religious organizations, most of Russian Muslims remain firmly attached to their country and its institutions and remain indifferent to the foreign missionaries. Like other communities in Russia, Muslims have used the freedoms they have won since the demise of communism and atheism to rediscover their religion. But they have mostly rejected offers made by Turkish missionaries, the Saudi government, or other foreigners to replace the Communist Party of the Soviet era with new religious tutors from abroad (notwithstanding Russian Salafists, a deeply conservative cohort that has intellectual ties to Saudi Arabia and that advocates living lives strictly modelled on those of the early companions of the Prophet Muhammad)^[95].

Of course, foreign influence cannot be denied. The fall of the Iron Curtain after the breakup of the Soviet Union occurred not only on its western but also southern

borders, causing an inflow of previously unknown religious and political ideas into Russia's Muslim regions[96]. Furthermore, widespread Internet and social media use characterizes Russian society; the upshot is that the Islamic digital world is increasingly available to Russian Muslim citizens, who are no longer isolated from global trends, whether feminine Islamic fashions or debates about halal food or radical online preaching[97].

Arab influence in Russia is virtually absent and financial support for Muslims is coming entirely from within Russia. However, conservative forms of Islam are being introduced with the influx of Muslim migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus. This has led to more conservative interpretations of Islam taking hold in Russia[98].

Russian Muslims re-established their ties with Muslims abroad, particularly in the Middle East. Naturally, ideas circulating throughout the rest of the Muslim world made their way into the Russian Muslim community too, both progressive and aggressive ideas. The fact that the years of Soviet oppression left little of Islam beyond a few rituals with no conceptual substance in many regions has contributed to this spread of new ideas. The old Islamic education system had been destroyed. An Islamic renaissance, or re-Islamization, was driven in the 1990s primarily by the invitation of clerics from abroad or by sending people to study in Islamic education centres abroad, mostly in the Middle East and North Africa. In some regions, this strengthened the traditional forms of Islam. But this movement of clerics coming from abroad also opened the way for radical views and ideas and created tensions within the Muslim communities. Radical ideas took root in regions where Islamic traditions had largely been destroyed (Kabardino-Balkaria, for example), or in regions where Islam was particularly strong (Dagestan, for example)[99].

These ideas, which did not correlate with "traditional" Islam, brought confusion into the minds and souls of Muslims, especially young people. They had a strong social and political impact and looked attractive and even effective. "New Islam" fell on the fertile ground created by the socio-economic and political crises of post-Soviet times. Internal discontent was unavoidably combined with Islamist (fundamentalist, Wahhabi) ideas. An Islamic opposition began to form in the country, primarily in the North Caucasus[100].

During the Russian wars in Northern Caucasus a radical element became more prominent. But with wars over and with extremism activity still occurring in that region, problems are arising among the different ethnicities and the different Islamic streams[101].

Russian authorities try to protect Russian traditional Islam. They have imposed restrictions limiting the activities of some Muslim groups. Government actions included detaining, fining, and imprisoning members of minority Muslim groups. Police conducted raids in private homes and places of worship, confiscating religious publications and property, and blocked their websites[102].

In Russia, all Islamist organizations have been banned, among them the Supreme Military *MajlisulShura* of the United *Mujahideen* Forces of Caucasus, People's Congress of Ichkeria and Dagestan, the Base (al-Qaeda), *Osbat al-Ansar*, *al-Jihad (al-Masri)*, *Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya*, the Muslim Brotherhood, *Lashkar-e-Taiba*, the

Taliban, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (or Islamic Party of Turkestan), *Jamiat al-Islah al-Idzhtimai*, *Jamiatlhya at-Turath al-Islami*, and *al-Haramain*. Regional authorities have also banned organizations operating on their territory[103].

Some authors say that Russia's security agencies fabricate militants where none exist and accuse local Muslims of extremist ties on the basis of evidence that often hardly goes beyond one's style of beard or dress[104]. Frequently aided by Muslim clerics close to the state, officials like to blame violence on "Wahhabis," Muslims who have ostensibly adopted Saudi Arabia's controversial version of Islam. But the government, the media, and the courts tend to apply the label liberally. They call nonconformists Wahhabis to reinforce the authority of state-backed Muslim clerics, who oppose religious styles that the government deems alien to Russian Islam[105].

Russian authorities have elaborated three parallel discourses on Islam to appear both "Islamophile" and fighting radical Islam^[106]. First, they uphold the discourse—inherited from the Soviet regime—on "friendship between peoples": Russia is a multinational and multi-religious country in which all the historical traditional religions are recognized as equal[107]. Second, and in parallel, Russian authorities have crafted a narrative on radical Islam in which all non-conformist versions of Islam are subsumed under the label "Wahhabism.[108]" Third, Russian authorities use the theme of Islam within the international arena to promote Moscow's great power strategy[109].

Islam in Russia is changing. Its presence is no longer confined to traditional forms and established centres of Muslim power; it also increasingly includes transnational Islam. While some transnational Islamic groups may share a similar goal of dominance and Islamization, they may differ in their methods and discourses that facilitate recruitment and the spread of their ideology. The Russian government has consistently used repressive measures against both violent and non-violent transnational Islamic groups. This has been controversial and at times counterproductive[110].

In order to reduce religious radicalization and better integrate Muslims in the Russian society, President Vladimir Putin's administration has adopted a multidimensional strategy which include: repression and coercion, most notably in the South Caucasus; diplomatic efforts in the Middle East and broader Muslim world to improve Russia's image; pro-active domestic policies to co-opt and support moderate Russian Muslim leaders and their communities; and attempts to construct a national identity and ideology which supports the multi-confessional and multinational nature of the Russian state and recognizes the Muslim contribution to Russian statehood and nationality. These policies have had some success[111].

The situation in Russia's Muslim community is currently relatively stable, and now the task is to ensure it stays that way. Like the majority of Russian society, Russian Muslims are mostly passive and loyal to the state. Of course there are still incidents involving Russia's Muslims, and inevitably suspicions of terrorism are swiftly voiced, but not always with reason and certainly, compared to the situation several years ago, things have improved^[112]. One aspect of Russia's Muslim community that doesn't change is its division into traditionalists, who practice local Islam (influenced by Tatar or Caucasus traditions, for example), and Salafists (Wahhabis), who fight

for the “purity” of the religion. The latter reject local, ethnic tradition, which they consider the legacy of paganism. What has changed is that while in the first half of the current decade dozens of clerics were murdered amid the rivalry between traditionalists and Salafists, in recent years there haven’t been any violent clashes^[113].

The threat of religious radicalization

Not only do ethnic Muslims account for approximately 20 million of Russia's total population of 144 million, or almost 15 percent, but their proportion is fast growing. This fact causes ethnic Russians to shudder about the country's population loss of at least 700,000 people a year, return to their faith, and turn against Muslims. The results include biased media portrayals, attacks on mosques and other crimes, efforts to block Muslim immigration, and the rise of extreme Russian nationalist groups. The Kremlin has responded to the issue in contradictory ways. Then-president Dmitry Medvedev in 2009 tried appeasement by stressing the importance of Islam to Russia, noting that *"Muslim foundations are making an important contribution to promoting peace in society, providing spiritual and moral education for many people, as well as fighting extremism and xenophobia."* He also announced that, due to its large Muslim population, *"Russia does not need to seek friendship with the Muslim world: Our country is an organic part of this world."* But, *"the Kremlin has discriminated against its Muslim minority and ignored (even abetted) the rise of corrosive xenophobia among its citizens. This has bred resentment and alienation among Russia's Muslims – sentiments that radical Islamic groups have been all too eager to exploit."*^[114]



Many of Russian Sunni Muslims live in the Northern Caucasus, historically the scene of anti-Russian Islamist upheavals. Two bloody wars pitting Muslims against Slavs happened in Chechnya not long ago. Neighbouring Dagestan is another powder keg, part of the jihadists’ self-proclaimed Caliphate of the Caucasus. Some clerics there deliver sermons considered sympathetic to the goals of the DAESH^[115].

Continued high profile attacks by the DAESH all over the world in 2015 prompted increased concern among Russian officials that DAESH could affect Russian security interests by destabilizing the Middle East, Afghanistan, and Central Asia. Russia's military involvement in Syria caused increased concern among Russian authorities about retaliatory terrorist attacks in Russia. Members of both DAESH and *al-Nusrah* Front made numerous threats of retaliation, including publishing a video in November 2015 threatening that soon "blood will spill like an ocean" in Russia, and beheading a Russian citizen from Chechnya in December. Authorities believed the main terrorist threats were related to the activities of armed groups in the North Caucasus and were concerned about DAESH's ability to influence domestic insurgent groups; *Imarat Kavkaz* or the Islamic Caucasus Emirate, the largest terrorist group in Russia, pledged allegiance to DAESH in 2015. Separatists and violent Islamist extremists calling for a pan-Islamic Caliphate in the North Caucasus continued attacks against Russian authorities, but the government did not label any as a "terrorist attack."^[116] Terrorism-related prosecutions concerning incidents occurring before 2015 continued, in addition to charges being brought against more than 100 persons for allegedly fighting with DAESH in Syria in 2015. Russian media reported that federal and local security organs continued counterterrorism operations in the North Caucasus. These operations occurred throughout the region, but predominately were in Dagestan, Chechnya, and Kabardino-Balkaria. Operations included roadblocks and larger-scale military-style operations, especially in rural areas^[117].

Former Soviet states provide the third-largest number of foreign fighter recruits for the Islamic State behind Western Europe and the Middle East and North of Africa, according to the Soufan Group^[118] and US government reports. Facing repression at home, many of central Asia's extremists have left the region for Iraq and Syria. Similarly, Moscow is believed to have deliberately turned a blind eye to people on watch lists leaving the country to join groups in the Middle East, while cracking down with extreme force on the radical elements that remain^[119]. According to a March 2016 report by the International Crisis Group, it has been Russian policy to allow Islamist radicals, mainly from the North Caucasus republics of Chechnya and Dagestan, to leave the country unimpeded. The same report affirms that Russia's North Caucasus insurgency has gone relatively quiet, as Moscow crushed militants and many left to fight in Syria and Iraq. But longstanding grievances remain and the war may only have widened, as evidenced by the bombing of a Russian airliner in Egypt and the emergence of new groups swearing allegiance to the DAESH in Russia itself ^[120]. The stakes of the fight against extremism in Russia's southernmost republics are high. In recent years, Dagestan has overtaken neighbouring Chechnya as the country's most deadly region. Ethnic heterogeneity — more than 30 languages are spoken locally — and political infighting have contributed to a power vacuum that has made the republic a fertile ground for the insurgency^[121].

According to the Soufan Group, official estimates from the Russian Federation alone suggest that 2,400 Russians had joined the Islamic State by September 2015. The Soufan Group has identified credible reports of foreign fighters in Syria from 12 of the 15 former Soviet republics and assessed that there are at least 4,700 fighters from the region^[122]. At the end of 2015, the Russian government estimated 2,900 Russian citizens were fighting with ISIL in Syria and Iraq^[123].

The majority of fighters come from the North Caucasus—Chechnya and Dagestan—with a smaller but still significant number from Azerbaijan and Georgia^[124]. The North Caucasus has a long history of Islamist extremism, and the increased flow of fighters from this region is in many ways unsurprising. The area is a cauldron of ethnic strife, nationalist separatism, and state repression since the collapse of the Soviet Union^[125].

Moscow continues to validate the power abuses of local ethnic leaders, all of whom are closely linked with President Vladimir Putin's security circles. Those loyal men are tasked with eliminating rebellious movements in exchange for unlimited political and economic impunity, and a right to play the card of Islamization in order to reduce the population's attraction for insurrectional movements. In order to increase effectiveness and cohesion, Russian central authorities have also set up local North Caucasian combatant units, which are supposed to be more effective than the federal security services, and which often comprise former amnestied criminals^[126]. Nevertheless, the Russian policy of appointing more or less trustworthy satraps offers no guarantee as far as the future is concerned. Moscow is quite aware that their local representatives will press for more and more independence (and money), are difficult to control and, in the final analysis, cannot be trusted^[127].

Local grievances have long been drivers of radicalization in the Caucasus^[128], and as the strong centralized security apparatus of the Russian government limits the scope for operations at home, the DAESH has offered an attractive alternative. The political vacuum and chaos in Syria allows the Islamic State and other jihadist groups to operate with more freedom of action than they would find in Central Asia. Middle East offers more opportunity than local groups such as the Islamic Caucasus Emirate. As in the West, much of the recruitment appears to happen through peer-to-peer interaction, and it may increase in line with Russian involvement in the Syrian civil war^[129].

Central Asian countries have also seen a significant increase in the numbers of their citizens becoming foreign fighters. The Soufan Group suggests a combined total of approximately 2,000 from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan^[130].

The role of Islam in Russian foreign policy

Religious diplomacy allows a state to use certain aspects of religion symbols and messages in international affairs^[131]. However, little attention has been paid to the role played by religion either as a shaper of Russian domestic politics or as means of understanding President Vladimir Putin's international actions^[132]. The instrumentalisation of religion for political aims has a long and rich tradition, which is evidenced in both Russia's internal and foreign policies^[133].

The exponential growth of the Russian Muslim population is a demographic evolution that would fundamentally change the country's character. Paul Goble ^[4], an expert on Russian minorities, concludes that "Russia is going through a religious transformation that will be of even greater consequence for the international

community than the collapse of the Soviet Union." The facile assumption that Moscow is and will remain focused on the West "is no longer valid," he argues. In particular, he predicts that the Muslim demographic surge "will have a profound impact on Russian foreign policy."^[134]



Around the world religion is on the rise. A variety of trends, including demographic shifts, urbanization, and the global transformation of religion, indicate that religion will help shape the dynamics of existing, new, and emerging great powers. Globalization's transformational effect on religion will also play a key role in the prevalence of global terrorism, religious conflict, and other threats to international security. Globalization also gives greater influence to ethnic and religious diasporas^[135].

The "Islamic factor" remains a part of Moscow's foreign policy. With the end of the bipolar global system, Islam has fully integrated into international politics, while forces operating under religious slogans have become international political actors^[136].

During the 1990s, something akin to a Russian strategy vis-à-vis Islam developed. In brief, Moscow followed a strategy of mediation without attaching great hopes to it^[137]. On many occasions, Russia emphasized its respect for Islam, the Muslim countries and their leaders, as well as the need to promote reconciliation between different cultures and civilizations^[138]. The relations between Moscow and those countries are based on the premise that Russia is a multi-confessional (mainly Christian/Moslem) country, which predetermines its right to simultaneously exist in two different civilizations^[139].

Outside observers typically consider Russia's large Muslim population to be a great challenge (or even a threat) for the country and its leadership. Nevertheless, President Vladimir Putin appears to have a different view and may see not only challenges but opportunities, including in Russia's diplomacy in the Middle East and

elsewhere in the Islamic world. He has increasingly emphasized Russians' shared moral values and tries to connect Russia's "traditional" values to those in the Middle Eastern, Asian and other non-Western societies[140].

The most important thing for Russia was to find a place for itself in the world and compensate for worsened relations with the West by a more active policy in other regions. After Vladimir Putin came to power, the Muslim vector of Russia's policy increased[141].

While clearly identifying Russia as a largely Christian country, President Vladimir Putin is attempting to establish a dividing line between the shared values of believers in many religious traditions and those of the "decadent" secular West, to make Western values into a liability rather than an asset for Western governments[142]. Russia has developed in recent years a new doctrine, according to which Muslim countries are Russia's natural allies in the confrontation with the West[143]. This approach exploits the fact that many in the Middle East — in both government and society — are indeed disturbed by the encroachment of liberal Western social mores that has accompanied globalization[144]. Muslim public opinion in general, above all in the Arab world, has a rather neutral or sometimes positive view of Russia, since it promotes a discourse that is critical of US-style democracy promotion and its attendant interference[145].

This may become Russia's most significant effort to date to develop a soft power strategy to combat Western influence in the Middle East and elsewhere in the Islamic world[146]. One event that contributed to the establishment of these special relations was Russia's accession to the Organization of the Islamic Conference as observer nation with a Muslim minority[147].

In the 2013 Valdai Club meeting, President Vladimir Putin began his speech by noting that countries must do everything in their power to preserve their own identities and values, for *"without spiritual, cultural and national self-definition . . . one cannot succeed globally."*[148]. Conservative values are an important card in the hands of President Vladimir Putin, who recognizes that Muslim cooperation is a necessity for his foreign policy goals, including the maintenance of solid relations with Iran, Syria, and other states in the Muslim world that might serve as counterweights to the expansion of U.S. power[149].

Russian foreign policy in the Muslim world is mainly focused on three areas: the South Caucasus, Central Asia and the North of Africa and Middle East.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, those republics in Central Asia and Azerbaijan emphasized their Muslim identity[150]. The Communist ideology that had faded was partly replaced by Islam and Islamism, spearheaded by emissaries from Saudi Arabia and other Arab and Muslim countries.[151]. In the first half of the 1990s foreign Muslims powers hoped to make a breakthrough into the region and its markets, but the "honeymoon" in relations between former Soviet republics and the Muslim world proved to be short-lived. Nevertheless, along Russia's southern border there emerged a seething Muslim belt with a non-Soviet identity and with sporadic manifestations of religious radicalism[152].

The central Asia Region and the South Caucasus have been under Russian influence for more than 150 years. However, Russian influence in the independent states of the South Caucasus and Central Asia has been weakening for almost two decades. Today new and non-traditional powers in the region like the US and China challenge the influence of region's traditional power, Russia. Moscow tries to counter that influence and shape the processes in central Asia according to its own interests, using a variety of means which include: economic pressure, energy dependence, multilateral groupings, diasporas and the reapplication of a Russian cultural education are all used to sustain the old but recently revived project of a Eurasian Union. Russia maintains a more multi-dimensional presence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia than any other country, and this may be its greatest asset in the more complex and pluralistic international order that is emerging[153]. Islam may also play a role in this game.

The major Muslim republics of the Soviet Union became politically independent, but in many other aspects their dependence on Moscow continued. The Central Asian Republics are members of several regional organizations whose stated aim is promoting multilateral solutions to security and economic challenges. Among them, the most relevant are the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Community (EurASEC). Both of these organizations are strongly supported by Russia and capitalize on residual political, economic, and bureaucratic linkages among former Soviet republics. The CSTO, formed under the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States, serves as a mutual defense alliance among Russia, Belarus, Armenia and three of the four Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan[154]. The EurASEC comprises a similar grouping of states but focuses on economics, including the creation of a common market, border security standards, a customs union, standardized currency exchange and joint programs on social and economic development. The Member States are Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan[155].

Furthermore, terrorism is other reason for Russia to keep a close watch over Central Asia. If radical Islam were to take over political power in these republics or even only one or two of them, this would be a major disaster for Russia, which considers this vast region an integral part of its "privileged zone of influence[156]."

Russia is also especially interested on the Middle East. On September 30, 2015, the Russian government also approved the deployment of its armed forces beyond the country's borders, setting the stage for the Syrian air campaign. The Kremlin's official position was that the Russian military would be specifically helping the Assad regime in its fight against the DAESH, focusing on the threats of spreading terrorism and regional destabilization[157]. In this way, the Kremlin also intends the thousands of Russian and Central Asian jihadists fighting for ISIS in Iraq and Syria will never return to stir up trouble at home. Thus, Moscow's role in Syria is also an effort to kill individuals who might threaten Russia's own stability[158]. The ROC also advocated Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict. However, its stated goal was protect Christians from DAESH and other radical groups[159].

To protect Russian interests in the country and the wider region, Moscow has sought to achieve them primarily through the empowerment of Syrian government forces

and their Hezbollah and Iranian allies. However, by siding with the Shiite regimes in Iran, Iraq, and Syria, Russia could also alienate its own population of some 16 million Muslims, most of whom are Sunni. Faced with this risk, Moscow has attempted to improve ties with some of the Middle East's Sunni players, such as Egypt[160].

President Vladimir Putin seeks to confirm Russia's status as a great power. It dispatched several dozen aircraft to Syria to strike anti-Assad forces, including the DAESH, established advanced air defence systems within Syria, sent strategic bombers on sorties over the country from bases in central Russia, and ordered the Russian navy to fire missiles at Syrian targets from positions in the Caspian and Mediterranean Seas. By doing so, Russia undermined the de facto monopoly on the global use of force that the United States has held since the collapse of the Soviet Union[161].

Russia's successful flexing of military power has led to the rapid expansion of its political clout as well. And not just among America's adversaries. From Israel to Saudi Arabia, from Egypt to Turkey, traditional U.S. partners are also increasingly compelled to curry favour with Moscow and may start looking for ways to be more accommodating to Russia's interests[162].

Regional states will have to take account of the reality of Russian power projection on their immediate doorstep, with potentially far-reaching impact on their own decision-making and behaviour. Recent Russian bombing raids from an air base in Iran raise the spectre that Moscow's growing military role, bad enough in the case of the eastern Mediterranean, could expand to the Gulf region as well, a theatre of perhaps even greater strategic consequence. More broadly, an expanded Russian military role in Iran would give Moscow the capability to project power in ways never before seen in the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, and Indian Ocean — critical lines of communication[163].

Russia's resurgence in the Middle East can evolve from a large and permanent Russian military presence in the eastern Mediterranean to a rapidly evolving Russian strategic relationship with Iran in the Gulf[164].

However, many observers have warned [5]that Russia's military campaign in Syria may backfire at home. Some analysts believe [6]that Russian Sunnis will recoil from Russia's support for Assad's Alawite-dominated regime and its attacks on Sunni rebels, and from Russia's effort to lead a coalition of Shiite powers, Iran, Iraq and Syria[165]. The on-going Syrian conflict has deepened traditional Shia and Sunni rift and attracted extremist on both sides; even it started as a peaceful popular revolt against a dictator. This can be attributed to many reasons going from the rise of extremist Sunni groups backed by the Gulf States; to the involvement of Hezbollah, supported by Iran; and the decline of the initial secular movement deprived of enough regional or international support. In Syria, the uprising against the Assad's regime has become an increasingly sectarian war. This is a consequence of identity politics, which have dominated Syria since its establishment after World War I and especially since the first Assad regime came to power in 1970.[166] Sectarian identity has also been the dominant factor in Iraqi society since 2003.[167]

Russia's Muslim community has never been united, and Russia's air strikes in Syria are threatening to stoke existing tensions. Most of Syria's opposition fighters are Sunni Muslims - like most of the Muslims who live in Russia. This is an uncomfortable truth for some within the Russian Muslim community. But the idea of anyone openly protesting against Russia's action is highly unlikely because of the fear of prosecution by the authorities^[168]. Russian Muslims are split regarding the intervention in Syria, but currently more pro-than anti-war^[169]. However, as the war drags on, Russia is being accused ^[7] of killing Syrian civilians — intentionally. As such allegations increase, Russian Muslims' attitudes may harden — especially those who say they're not sure what they think about intervention or who don't really understand the conflict. Even if more Russian Muslims support intervening in Syria now, that still leaves a minority who strongly object to the intervention and who hate the Assad regime. Russian Muslims were not paying much attention to Syria at first. In the beginning of 2013, however, a part of Russian Muslims began supporting the opposition. While Russian Muslims were not against Putin or the Russian state, they opposed Bashar al-Assad and even some loyal Muslims refused to accept Russian foreign policy toward Damascus^[170].

That might come back to haunt Russian national security. As Russia intervenes in Syria, that minority may become even more interested in joining the DAESH.

The Russian President's intervention in Syria is, among other geo-strategic reasons, driven by fear of Islamic extremism among his country's own Muslim population. But rather than only squelching the threat, it has also the potential to make it worse. Many of Russian Muslims naturally sympathize with the Sunni Muslims currently being bombed and killed by Russians in Syria. Any Russian miscalculation in Syria could therefore severely undermine President Vladimir Putin's political power base at home^[171].

Conclusions

In the future, the relations between the Russian government and its Muslim citizens will much depend on the integration of national and religious minorities in Russia: will they be loyal to regime or will the separatist trends become stronger?^[172]

With its mix of cultivating religious allies, repressing others, and perpetuating an image of vast Islamic unrest emanating from the Caucasus, the Kremlin's approach to Islam is contradictory. It proclaims Islam to be a traditional Russian religion, defended by the state, but stokes fear among non-Muslims of certain interpretations of Islam and brands entire regions with the label of Islamic militancy. The government's selective promotion of Islam corresponds with Russian foreign policy goals. The affirmation of Islam's historical ties to Russia, together with the stance that Russia was an "organic part" of the Muslim world, has framed Moscow's quest to restore its great-power status in Asia and the Middle East^[173].

Russian Islam will continue to grow in influence out of frustration with the Kremlin's policies and as a result of growing migration from Central Asia. Many Russians are afraid of Islam. These factors may lead to further conflict^[174]. The rising number of

citizens self-referring to Islam—will impact both Russia's domestic situation and its foreign policy options in the medium and long term[175].

The complication of processes taking place in the Russian Muslim community and events in the Muslim world requires that the Russian authorities rethink their attitude towards Islam, including political Islam, giving up stereotypes, and developing new approaches. This is particularly important as an adverse economic situation can aggravate political problems and worsen the already tense inter-ethnic relations[176].

Over the long term, strategic planners will have to take into consideration Russia's rising Islamic identity and its possible impact on foreign policy. An increasing part of Russia's public opinion will pressure central authorities for a more pro-Muslim foreign policy[177].

Putin recognizes that Muslim cooperation is a necessity for his foreign policy goals, including the maintenance of solid relations with Iran, Syria, and other states in the Muslim world that might serve as counterweight to the expansion of US power. These postures are challenged by the growing domestic chorus of xenophobic and racist invective that populist politicians and right-wing organizations direct against Russia's immigrants[178].

The North Caucasus could follow the path of Pakistan's northern tribal federal areas: local clan leaders and Islamist insurgents maintain a precarious (in) balance in a remote region of the country with the blessing—voluntary at first, now uncontrollable—of the central authorities[179].

Russia will likely take military action near its southern border, particularly if DAESH manages to expand into the Central Asian states, all of which are relatively fragile. Some of them face leadership transitions and others are home to high unemployment, official corruption, ethnic tension, and religious radicalism—the same sort of problems that triggered the Arab Spring. Russia considers Central Asia a vital security buffer. If the government of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, or Tajikistan faces a major challenge from Islamist extremists, Russia will likely intervene politically and militarily, perhaps under the mandate of the CSTO, an alliance to which all four states belong[180].

The South Caucasus has long been a geopolitical fault line, under pressure from both ethnic tensions and the ambitions of powerful neighbours. The region has seen its share of drama in the 25 years since the Soviet collapse. By all indications, the region faces more upheaval in the years ahead. Russia might use conflicts in the area to cement Russia's own position as regional broker[181].

In the coming years, then, Russia's military will continue to focus on the country's vast neighbourhood in greater Eurasia, where Moscow believes using force constitutes strategic defence. If Russia's venture in Syria achieves Moscow's political objectives there and Russia's economy does not significantly deteriorate, the Kremlin may use military force around the world, backing up its claim to be one of the world's great powers, alongside China and the United States[182].

The role of Islam in Russian foreign policies can be expected to grow. Shall Russian Muslims – elites and the population – be a legitimate and solid stakeholder in the governmental affairs and be integrated within existing political forces, both foreign and domestic politics in Russia would become more disposed towards constructive engagement with the Muslim world. The benefits of such a scenario in today's unstable world would be a certain win-win for all. Russia has a foundation on which to design policies that allow for strong relations with its Muslim population as well as with Muslim countries. Russia is the permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) with the highest ratio of Muslims, residing within its borders^[183].

However, Russia's aligning with Shiite powers can be an obstacle to establish deeper relations with Sunni countries in Middle East and the North of Africa and may backfire at home. The situation in the Middle East and Russian military operations in Syria were used for propaganda purposes to paint Russia as taking part in a 'Shia-Orthodox' coalition against Sunnis. This is a dangerous and harmful image for Russia, where the majority of Muslims are Sunnis^[184].

Riyadh and other capitals in the Gulf increasingly believe that they are being abandoned by the US, and so they seek ways to assert themselves^[185]. Relations with Russia could be used by Saudi Arabia on future negotiations with Washington as leverage to get more support or military aid, equipment, and weapons. Russia can make use of this potential to promote its interests in the Middle East and in the Muslim world in general. Nevertheless, Russia has a unique opportunity to become a neutral player on and can take on the role of non-engaged intermediary in complex and contradiction-ridden Middle East political processes. This policy of equal distance from all forces is the most advantageous for Russia in terms of its interests and the interests of Russian Muslims^[186].

Russia also faces another uncomfortable if inexact parallel with US's wars in the Middle East in the form of its two wars in Chechnya, where Muslim Chechen separatists were quite successful in mobilizing financial support and recruiting fighters from the Middle East and particularly the Persian Gulf. There also was Russia's support for pro-Serbian forces against Bosnian Muslims as Yugoslavia disintegrated and against Albanian Muslims in Kosovo. All this will complicate any effort to strengthen sociocultural ties and sympathies in some Muslim countries^[187].

It is too soon to say whether Russia's emerging values-based diplomacy is here to stay, much less whether it can succeed. Nevertheless, it is important, as a clear and self-conscious effort to shape a national identity that incorporates and leverages Russia's diversity to build strong ties based on shared opposition to the West^[188].

Juan Carlos Antunez Moreno is an Officer of the Spanish Army who is currently working as a Socio-Cultural Analyst in the NATO Joint Force Command in Brunssum, Netherlands. He was previously posted in the Intelligence Unit of the Regional Spanish Army HQ in Melilla (North of Africa) and in the Information and Analysis Division in the European Union Forces (EUFOR) HQ in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina. For more than 15 years he has focused his work and studies on

the cultural, ethnic and religious factors of armed conflicts. He has completed a PhD program on cultural studies, specially focused on Islamic and Arabic studies in the University of Seville, in Spain.

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[1] RIA Novosti. *Putin considers Islam indelible part of Russia's religious life*. 30 August 2012.

[2] CIA WORLD FACT BOOK, Russia Population.

[3] Fayzullina, Karina. *Interpreting Russian policy and Islam*. Al-Jazeera Centre for Studies. 28 September 2014.

[4] Laruelle, Marlene. *How Islam Will Change Russia*. The Jamestown Foundation. September 13, 2016.

[5] Coyer, Paul. *(Un)Holy Alliance: Vladimir Putin, The Russian Orthodox Church And Russian Exceptionalism*. Forbes. 21 May 2015.

[6] Soroka, George. *Putin's Patriarch*. Foreign Affairs. February 11, 2016.

[7] Just how much influence the ROC has within Russian society is illustrated by poll numbers that show that the vast majority of Russians self-identify as Russian

Orthodox (estimates range from 68-90 percent), although the majority of these do not attend services or otherwise publicly practice their faith. In fact, a sizeable minority of Russians (polls have shown around 30 percent) who self-identify as Russian Orthodox simultaneously describe themselves as being atheist, illustrating that many value the Church primarily a symbol of Russian culture and national identity than as an actual spiritual presence in their day to day lives. For both those who practice their faith regularly and for those who view Russian Orthodoxy as primarily a cultural symbol, however, the Church has a deep well of social trust, and the vast majority of Russians share the Church's vision of Russian national exceptionalism and suspicion of the West. Coyer, Paul. 21 May 2015.

[8] Gorvett, Jonathan. *Russian Prayers*. Foreign Affairs. July 14, 2016.

[9] Petrenko, Galina. *Influence of the Russian Orthodox Church on the Russia's Foreign Policy*. 4th ECPR Graduate Student Conference Jacobs University Bremen. 4-6 July 2012.

[10] Barbashin, Anton, and Thoburn, Hannah. *Putin's Brain*. Foreign Affairs. Mar 31, 2014.

[11] In February 2006, at a meeting in the Vienna headquarters of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov expressed the hope that "the Russian Orthodox Church will play a role in the settlement of the present contradictions and the easing of the conflict of civilizations." Malashenko, Alexei. *The Islam Factor in Russia's Foreign Policy*. Russia in Global Affairs. Vol. 5.No. 3.July-September. 2007.

[12] Soroka, George. February 11, 2016.

[13] Petro, Nicolai N. *Russia's Orthodox Soft Power*. Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs. March 23, 2015.

[14] The conflation of Russia's economic, political, and military interests with a moral opposition to the West was sharply evinced in Putin's 2013 speech at the Valdai Discussion Club, where he insisted: "*We can see how many of the Euro-Atlantic countries are actually rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of Western civilization. . . . They are implementing policies that equate large families with same-sex partnerships, belief in God with the belief in Satan.*" Soroka, George. February 11, 2016.

[15] Nicolai N. Petro. March 23, 2015. *Rus* is the eastern Slavic proto-state, centred in the city of Kiev, which was established in the ninth century and accepted Christianity from Byzantium in 988 AD. *Rus* includes Ukraine, despite being now a sovereign country. Ukraine is considered as *Rus* spiritual and national birthplace, despite being run by a government that is seen from Russian perspective as trying to distance itself from the civilizational root common to all eastern Slavs. Soroka, George. February 11, 2016.

[16] As Metropolitan Kirill (now patriarch) actually said in 2004 during his official visit to Kuwait, "Certain phenomena that are considered to be sinful from both Christian

and Muslim point of view are often treated as a norm in the modern system of human rights, which is based on secular, liberal values". Petrenko, Galina. 4-6 July 2012.

[17] In exchange, early in Vladimir Putin's presidency, the Russian Duma passed a law returning all church property seized during the Soviet era. Over the past decade and a half, Putin has ordered state-owned energy firms to contribute billions to the rebuilding of thousands of churches destroyed under the Soviets, and many of those rich oligarchs surrounding him are dedicated supporters of the ROC who have contributed to the growing influence of the church in myriad ways. Additionally, the ROC has been given rights that have vastly increased its role in public life, including the right to teach religion in Russia's public schools and the right to review any legislation before the Russian *Duma*. Coyer, Paul. May 2015.

[18] Soroka, George. February 11, 2016.

[19] Kizenko, Nadieszda. *Russia's Orthodox Awakening*. Foreign Affairs. September 17, 2013.

[20] Soroka, George. February 11, 2016.

[21] Kolesnikov, Andrei. *Russia's Militant Anti-Atheism*. Carnegie Moscow Center. 12.09.2016.

[22] Bennetts, Marcs. *The Kremlin's Holy Warrior*. Foreign Policy. November 24, 2015.

[23] Petrenko, Galina. 4-6 July 2012.

[24] Thomas, Scott M. *A Globalized God*. Foreign Affairs. November 1, 2010.

[25] Salem, Paul and Malashenko, Alexey. *The Russia-Middle East Connection: The Arab Spring and its Impact on Russia's Muslims*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. April 12, 2013.

[26] Laqueur, Walter. *Russia's Muslim Strategy*. Middle East Papers: Middle East Strategy at Harvard. November 1, 2009. Number Six.

[27] Erasmus. *Sultans and tsars. Russia has always had an ambivalent relationship with Islam*. The Economists. November 25, 2015.

[28] United States Department of State. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor International. Religious Freedom Report for 2011.

[29] Akhmetova, Elmira. *Russia*. In *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe, Volume 2*. Edited by Nielsen, Jørgen, Akgönül, Samim, Alibašić, Ahmet and Raci, Egdu. BRILL. 2010. Pgs. 435-456.

[30] Erasmus. November 25, 2015.

[31] Malashenko, Alexei. *Islam in Russia.Changes in the Kremlin's Rethoric*. Russia in Global Affairs. 23 September 2014.

[32] Crews, Robert D. *Moscow and the Mosque*. Foreign Affairs. February 6, 2014.

[33] Laqueur, Walter. *Russia's Muslim Strategy*. November 1, 2009.

[34] On that see Laruelle, Marlene. *The Ideological Shift on the Russian Radical Right: From Demonizing The West To Fear Of Migrants*. Problems of Post-Communism 57, no. 6 (2010): pp. 19–31. At the same time, minorities' identities seem to be weakening. Claims to sovereignty are jeopardized and federalism no longer appears as a solution for the country's future. Putin's success in the 2000s, and the emergence of new middle classes and new economic spaces have diminished the importance given to the ethnic and linguistic issues of minorities. Laruelle, Marlene. September 13, 2016.

[35] These migrants are young (often less than 30 years of age), practice religion more than their Soviet elders, and, consequently lay less and less claim to their ethnic identity. In the cultural shock constituted by migration, they feel united beyond national differences by their belonging to Islam, which defines them in the eyes of the Russians. Ibid.

[36] Salem, Paul and Malashenko, Alexey. April 12, 2013.

[37] Walter Laqueur. November 1, 2009.

[38] Marlene Laruelle. September 13, 2016.

[39] Ibid.

[40] CIA WORLD FACT BOOK, Russia Population.

[41] Ibid.

[42] According to Ravil Gainutdin, head of the Russian Council of Muftis (RCM) and the head of the Spiritual Board of Muslims of the European part of Russia, 80 percent of labour immigrants are ethnic Muslims. Akhmetova, Elmira. *Russia*. In *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe, Volume 6*. Edited by Nielsen, Jørgen, Akgönül, Samim, Alibašić, Ahmet and Raci, Egdunas. BRILL. 2014. Pgs. 510.

[43] Malashenko [9], Alexei. 23 September 2014.

[44] Akhmetova, Elmira. *Russia* (2014). Pg 435.

[45] In April 2003, President Vladimir Putin at a meeting with the mufti of the Muslims of Tajikistan Amonulla Nematzade floated the idea that Russia to a certain extent be considered a part of the Muslim world since about 20 million Muslims live in the country. Arab News. *Observer's role strengthens Moscow's relations with OIC*. Sunday, 2011-06-12

[46] Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, *The Future of the Global Muslim Population*, January 2011.

[47] Ibid.

[48] By some estimates, 45 percent of all pregnancies in Russia end in abortion. Some researchers suggest that the rate among Muslims is significantly lower. See Twigg, Judyth. *Differential Demographics: Russia's Muslim and Slavic Populations*. PON ARS Policy Memo No. 388, December 2005.

[49] At the beginning of 2016, the number of registered HIV positive people surpassed one million. The number of Russians living with HIV has almost doubled in the last five years. Furthermore, experts suggest that the real number of HIV positive Russians could be as high as 1.5 million out of a population of 143 million (approximately 1,05 percent). Russia has one of the fastest growing rates of HIV/Aids in the world. Three million Russians in total may be infected with HIV in about four to five years unless tough measures are taken to halt the spread of the virus. If the current trend is not reverted, this infection, which affects people aged 25-35, will have a negative effect on Russia recruitment and mobilization capabilities. For more information about HIV impact on Russian society, please see: Al Jazeera. *Left out in the cold: Living with HIV in Russia*. 03 Sep 2016. ABC News. *Russia faces HIV epidemic with 1 million positive cases; Kremlin blames moral lapses*. 7 Sep 2016. Reuters. *Russia's AIDS Epidemic Reaches Crisis Levels*. January 22, 2016. Agence France-Presse. *Russian HIV-Aids epidemic worsening under Kremlin policies, says expert*. 17 February 2016.

[50] Twigg, Judyth. December 2005.

[51] Stratfor. *Reassessing the Russian Identity, Part 4: Putin's Evolving Russia*. November 29, 2012.

[52] Mukhametov, Abdullah Rinat. *Russian Muslims Face Challenges of Demography and Migration*. New Eastern Europe. 14 August 2015.

[53] Stratfor. *Russia's Growing Muslim Population*. August 8, 2013.

[54] Laruelle, Marlene. *How Islam Will Change Russia*. September 13, 2016.

[55] Mukhametov, Abdullah Rinat . 14 August 2015.

[56] Bennetts, Marc. *Immigration surge brings economic benefits, tension to Russia. Putin's visa-free travel pacts attract job seekers from impoverished former Soviet republics*. Special to the Washington Times. Monday, September 15, 2014.

[57] Mirovalev, Mansur. *Despite animosity, Moscow's Muslims change the city*. Al-Jazeera. July 2015.

[58] According to Russian sociologists, at the current rate of migration, the indigenous Muslim people of Russia – communities in the Volga-Urals and the North Caucasus – will themselves become minorities in relation to the Central Asian

majority (yesterday's immigrants) in as little as 20-30 years. Mukhametov, Abdullah Rinat. 14 August 2015.

[59] Stratfor. November 29, 2012.

[60] The US Department report International Religious Freedom Report for 2011 stated that, in the greater Moscow region, Muslim groups complained that they had been limited to only four official mosques. By the end of 2010, there were 241 official mosques throughout the country. According to public comments by Mufti Gainutdin, 7,200 unofficial mosques have been built in the country in the last 20 years. United States Department of State. Religious Freedom Report for 2011.

[61] This problem is not new either. In 2012, Hasan Fakhritdinov, imam of what is known as the city's Historical Mosque, told the BBC that the existing facilities were just not enough. "We are asking the authorities to let us build new mosques, but they are ignoring our demands," he said. "Now people have to pray outside in the rain or the snow." On the other hand, Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin, a frequent critic of Muslim immigrants, said in the past that the "excessive" number of Muslim newcomers to Moscow was "harmful" and that no new building permits for mosques would be granted. Hanrahan, Mark. *Moscow Is Largest Muslim City In Europe, But Faithful Face Discrimination From Public, Authorities*. International Business Times. 07/23/15.

[62] Crews, Robert D. *A Patriotic Islam? Russia's Muslims Under Putin*. World Politics Review. March 8, 2016. The Moscow Cathedral Mosque opened on 23 September 2015 with a ceremony attended by President Vladimir Putin, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Palestinian National Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. The facility, built with mostly private funds, could accommodate approximately 10,000 people during services, but Muslim leaders stated Moscow's four mosques were inadequate for Moscow's Muslims. United States Department of State. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor International. Religious Freedom Report for 2015.

[63] Stratfor. August 8, 2013

[64] See SOVA-Center. *Racism and Xenophobia in December 2015: Including Preliminary Results for the Year*. January 12, 2016. See also Gerber, Theodore P. *Beyond Putin? Nationalism and Xenophobia in Russian Public Opinion*. The Washington Quarterly 37, no. 3 (2014): pp. 113–134.

[65] Bennetts, Marc. September 15, 2014.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Stratfor. *Russia: Few Options to Redress Ethnic Tensions*. August 7, 2013.

[68] Mainville, Michael. *Russia has a Muslim dilemma Ethnic Russians hostile to Muslims / Followers of Islam say they have been citizens a long time*. San Francisco Chronicle. Chronicle Foreign Service. Sunday, November 19, 2006.

[69] Stratfor. August 8, 2013

[70] "A visa regime would mean that we are pushing former Soviet republics away," President Putin said in 2014. "But we need to bring them closer." Bennetts, Marc. Monday, September 15, 2014

[71] Stratfor. November 29, 2012.

[72] Laruelle, Marlene. September 13, 2016.

[73] Mainville, Michael. Sunday, November 19, 2006.

[74] Mukhametov, Abdullah Rinat. 14 August 2015. The distorted census figures, police intimidation, and bigotry lump all of Russia's Muslims together into a single group, even though they are in fact a varied lot spread across the country. In places such as Tatarstan, Muslims make up the elites, but in Moscow, most occupy the lowest ranks of the labour force. Although the Russian federal system gives Russian Muslims considerable political influence, government policies, including well-documented cases of police harassment and raids of homes and businesses, marginalize Muslim immigrants, who remain invisible to census takers yet appear highly visible to Muscovites anxious about Muslim immigration. Crews, Robert D. February 6, 2014.

[75] Laruelle, Marlene. September 13, 2016.

[76] Stratfor. August 7, 2013.

[77] Malashenko, Alexey. *Preserving the calm in Russia's Muslim Community*. Carnegie Moscow Center. 09.09.2016.

[78] Malashenko, Alexei. 23 September 2014

[79] United States Department of State. Religious Freedom Report for 2015

[80] Laqueur, Walter. November 1, 2009.

[81] Yarlykapov, Akhmet. *Russian Islam and the Situation in the Middle East*. Russia in Global Affairs. 14 June 2016.

[82] Akhmetova, Elmira. (2014).

[83] Mirovalev, Mansur. 22 July 2015.

[84] The Muslim community of Moscow alone is estimated to be around 2 million (about 20 percent of the total), and St Petersburg's Muslim population is approximately 700,000 (out of a population of about 4.78 million, according to the 2010 census). Akhmetova, Elmira. *Islam in Russia: Past, Present and Future*. Historiafactory. July 2, 2016 ^[8]

[85] Aside from the Caucasus, there are now two concentrations of Muslims in Russia. One is in Moscow, swollen by labour migration, where they number 2 million approximately. The other is in the faith's old bastions: Bashkortostan and, above all, Tatarstan. The Economist. *Russia's Muslims, A benign growth?*. Apr 4th 2007.

[86] Akhmetova, Elmira. July 2, 2016.

[87] Yarlykapov, Akhmet. 14 June 2016.

[88] Malashenko, Alexei. 23 September 2014.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Yarlykapov, Akhmet. June 2016.

[91] Crews, Robert D. February 6, 2014.

[92] Yarlykapov, Akhmet. 14 June 2016. The two Muslim leaders have been battling for years over control of Russia's Muslim institutions, including numerous regional clerical bodies and schools, in a struggle for prestige, financial resources, and access to state patronage. Crews, Robert D. February 6, 2014.

[93] Ibid.

[94] Malashenko, Alexei. 23 September 2014.

[95] Crews, Robert D. February 6, 2014.

[96] Malashenko, Alexei. 23 September 2014.

[97] Laruelle, Marlene. September 13, 2016.

[98] Salem, Paul and Malashenko, Alexey. April 12, 2013.

[99] Yarlykapov, Akhmet. 14 June 2016.

[100] A survey conducted in 2010 by the Media-Orient agency in the North Caucasus showed mixed attitudes towards Wahhabism among local Muslims. Seventy-three percent of those polled reject it as religious and political extremism, while 22 percent are positive about it. The percentage of negative responses was the highest in Dagestan and Chechnya – 97 percent and 86 percent, respectively, and the highest level of positive views was in Kabardino-Balkaria – 39 percent. At the same time, as Dagestani sociologist Zaid Abdulagatov writes, the figures for Dagestan showed “a great difference in the percentage of people who favour banning Wahhabism as an extremist branch of Islam, and in the percentage of those who want Wahhabism banned as a religious teaching in Russia – 82.8 percent and 42.2 percent, respectively.” Malashenko, Alexei. 23 September 2014.

[101] Four major plots targeting high-level Sufi imams in Dagestan by Salafists have occurred since October 2011 to the end of November 2012, and three of the four

imams targeted were killed. The latest Sufi leader targeted (in August), Sheikh Said Afandi, was working on a peace negotiation between the two groups. A similar incident took place in Tatarstan in July 2012 when a coordinated attack targeted the chief mufti of Tatarstan and his deputy. The current theory is that the attack was motivated by the Salafist-Sufi divide in Tatarstan. These sorts of incidents are not just religious in nature; they also have political motivations. Stratfor. *Reassessing the Russian Identity, Part 5: Faith, Age and the New Russian*. November 30, 2012.

[102] United States Department of State. Religious Freedom Report for 2015

[103] For example, in Dagestan these include *Djamaat* of Dagestan, *JamaatShariat*, and *Jannet*. Most of these organizations were engaged in terrorism. At the same time, many organizations and, most importantly, ordinary Muslims have been accused of terrorism as well, although they had no relation to terrorism but shared the ideas of “New Islam,” criticized the authorities and the traditional clergy loyal to them, and rendered support to members of their clans who participated in the resistance movement. Malashenko, Alexei. 23 September 2014.

[104] For example, in 2011, 19 Muslim groups were labelled as terrorist organizations and banned. According to human rights groups, bans on Muslim groups for alleged ties to international terrorism made it easier for officials to detain some individual Muslims arbitrarily for alleged connections to these groups. United States Department of State. Religious Freedom Report for 2011.

[105] Crews, Robert D. February 6, 2014.

[106] See Aitamurto, Karina. *Protected and Controlled. Islam and ‘Desecularisation from Above’ in Russia*. Europe-Asia Studies 68, no. 1 (2016): pp. 182–202.

[107] Graney, Katherine. *‘Russian Islam’ and the Politics of Religious Multiculturalism in Russia*. In Arel, Dominique and Ruble, Blair A. eds, *Rebounding Identities: The Politics of Identity in Russia and Ukraine* (Woodrow Wilson Center Press with Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

[108] The term Wahhabism is meant to describe the official ideology in force in Saudi Arabia; calls for a literal reading of the Koran and for rediscovering Islam’s original purity would be better covered by the term Salafism, which is less widespread in Russia than in Europe. Several anti-extremist pieces of legislation have attempted to codify this policy, such as one banning the *Hizb-utTahrir* and the *TablighiJamaat* movements, which are often decried in the Russian media as Wahhabi despite sharing no theological doctrine with this Saudi current. Non-conformist Islam, or non-traditional Islam, by this interpretation, is necessarily “foreign,” and not recognized by the religious leaders neither by the political ones. Russian authorities have therefore been cultivating the image of a regime that shows no pity toward “non-traditional” Muslims that they consider “radicals”. See the many articles devoted to this issue on the Moscow-based SOVA Center, sova-center.ru. See also Verkhovskii, Alexandr. eds, *Xenophobia, Freedom of Conscience and Anti-Extremism in Russia in 2015* (Moscow: SOVA, 2015). Quoted in Laruelle, Marlene. September 13, 2016.

[109] Russia presents itself as the defender of traditional “conservative” religions, that is, of both Christianity and Islam—with a special focus on the topic of the traditional, heterosexual family—in their opposition to the West’s supposed moral decay and its growing recognition of sexual minorities. Laruelle, Marlene. September 13, 2016.

[110] Munster, Anna. *Transnational Islam in Russia and Crimea*. The Chatham House. November 2014.

[111] Although these policies have had their successes, there are also significant limitations, the most notable of which is the failure to address the problems of poor governance in the North Caucasus, which has sustained the Islamist insurgency in the region. The failure to develop an intermediary Muslim civil society in Russia more generally also contributes to the continuing appeal of Islamist radicalism, particularly among younger Russian Muslims. Dannreuther, Roland. *Islamic Radicalization in Russia: An Assessment*. International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-). Vol. 86, No. 1 (Jan., 2010), pp. 109-126.

[112] Malashenko, Alexey. 09.09.2016.

[113] Ibid.

[114] Pipes, Daniel. *MuslimRussia?* The Washington Times. October 20, 2013. DAESH, is the Arabic acronym for Al Dawla al-Islamiya fil Iraq wa'al Sham. It is used in this paper to supplant the more widely used English ISIL or ISIS. First it was Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) or Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), with the Levant and Syria referring to a region stretching from southern Turkey through Syria to Egypt. Then in June 2014, the group renamed itself Islamic State (IS), suggesting its ambitions to be a worldwide caliphate rather than just in the Middle East. Opponents of the term Islamic State say it is neither Islamic nor a state. The term DAESH is now gaining favour. It sounds like the Arabic words Daes ("one who crushes something underfoot") and Dahes ("one who sows discord"). According to The Guardian, the acronym has even become an Arabic word in its own right, with its plural "daw'aish" meaning "bigots who impose their views on others". Black, Ian, *The Islamic State: is it Isis, Isil – or possibly Daesh?*, The Guardian (21 September 2014).

[115] Kalb, Marvin. *Putin’s Muslim Nightmare*. Foreign Policy. November 2, 2015.

[116] Russian authorities avoided labelling attacks as “terrorist attacks” in order to maintain the narrative that they are defeating terrorism, and that Russia, especially the North Caucasus, is stable.

[117] United States Department of State. Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights. Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism. Releases. Country Reports on Terrorism. 2015

[118] The Soufan Group. *Foreign Fighters: An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq*. International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR). December 8, 2015.

[119] Groll, Elias, De Luce, Dan and Standish, Reid. *Istanbul Attack Shows the Dangerous New Face of the Islamic State*. Foreign Affairs. June 30, 2016.

[120] The International Crisis Group. *The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria: An Exported Jihad?*. 16 March 2016

[121] That Dagestan has a serious problem with disaffected youth turning to radical Islam is clear enough. By the estimates of local security services, between 900 and 3,000 young Dagestanis have joined the Islamic State over the last few years, the vast majority of them Salafi Muslims. Carroll, Oliver. *Cracking Down on Russia's Caliphate*. Foreign Policy. May 31, 2016

[122] The Soufan Group. December 8, 2015.

[123] U.S. Department of State. Country Reports on Terrorism. 2015

[124] Paul, Amanda. *Foreign Fighters from the Caucasus*. NRT News. July 21, 2015.

[125] Crews, Robert D. February 6, 2014.

[126] Moscow conceives the North Caucasus as a separate region from the rest of Russian territory, one requiring special statutes. Its view of the region is above all security-oriented: it is a border zone, the periphery of the empire, which must remain under direct control of the centre and especially of the security services. The state programs for the development of the North Caucasus have not been successful, as demonstrated by the high level of local poverty compared with the rest of the country and the widespread emigration of North Caucasian youth with few job prospects[126]. Laruelle, Marlene. September 13, 2016.

[127] Laqueur, Walter. November 1, 2009.

[128] Chatham House. *Exporting Jihad: Foreign Fighters from the North Caucasus and Central Asia and the Syrian Civil War*. Russia and Eurasia Programme. September 23, 2015.

[129]The Soufan Group. December 8, 2015.

[130] In August 2015, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which has operated in Afghanistan and Pakistan since the early 2000s, became part of the Islamic State. The Soufan Group. December 8, 2015.

[131] Curanovic, Alicia. *Religion in Russia's Foreign Policy*. New Eastern Europe. 04 August 2013.

[132] Coyer, Paul. 21 May 2015.

[133] Curanovic, Alicia. 04 August 2013.

[134] Paul Goble is an expert on Islam in Russia and a research associate at the University [10] of Tartu in Estonia. Mainville, Michael. Sunday, November 19, 2006.

[135] Thomas, Scott M. November 1, 2010.

[136] Malashenko, Alexei. July-September. 2007.

[137] In fact this overall strategy vis-à-vis Islam and the Muslim world, it is replete with contradictions. On the one hand, there is the conviction that Russia ought to strive for an alliance with the Islamic countries or at least some of them (above all Turkey and Iran—the Arab countries usually figure last and Pakistan does not figure at all). On the other hand, a deep distrust prevails. Laqueur, Walter. November 1, 2009.

[138] The religious-political reawakening of Islam (and often of radical Islam) coincided with the growth of a radical nationalist mood among the Russian population. This had partly to do with the influx of Muslims in the major Russian cities, which generated hostility and xenophobia. The Russian foreign ministry was preoccupied with the foreign political impact of anti-Muslim sentiments on Russia's relations with the neighbouring Muslim countries. The reputation of Russia in the Muslim world was already at a low point due to the Afghan war and the first Chechen war (1994-96). Ibid. This situation was even worse after the Russian support to Serbians in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo.

[139] Malashenko, Alexei. July-September. 2007.

[140] Sanders, Paul J. *Putin's Muslim family values*. Al Monitor. May 29, 2014.

[141] Malashenko, Alexei. July-September. 2007.

[142] Sanders, Paul J. *Putin's Muslim family values*. Al Monitor. May 29, 2014.

[143] Walter Laqueur. November 1, 2009.

[144] Paul J. Sanders. May 29, 2014.

[145] See Alexander Fischer's current research *Finding Friends Abroad: External Perceptions of Russia* forthcoming paper. Referred in Marlene Laruelle, Marlene. September 13, 2016.

[146] Paul J. Sanders. May 29, 2014.

[147] However, Alexei Malashenko affirms that the rapprochement with the OIC failed to deliver Russia any dividends in the economy and real politics. Rather, the relationship was merely symbolic and served as an argument for the Kremlin to diversify its foreign policy. He adds that, on the whole, Russia's approach to the Muslim world remains ambivalent. Attempts by President Vladimir Putin's Russia for rapprochement with the Muslim world have not allayed mutual distrust. Malashenko, Alexei. July-September. 2007.

[148] Petro, Nicolai N. March 23, 2015.

[149] Crews, Robert D. *Putin's Khanate*. Foreign Affairs. April 7, 2014.

[150] Malashenko, Alexei. July-September. 2007.

[151] They built hundreds of new mosques, launched various religious-nationalist organizations, and reorganized the *hadj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca (albeit at the modest level of about 20,000 pilgrims a year) Laqueur, Walter. November 1, 2009.

[152] Malashenko, Alexei. July-September. 2007.

[153] Nixey, James. *The Long Goodbye: Waning Russian Influence in the South Caucasus and Central Asia*. The Chatham House. June 2012.

[154] Global Security. *Collective Security Treaty Organization*.

[155] Eurasian Economic Community Webpage.

[156] Laqueur, Walter. November 1, 2009.

[157] Taken alongside the fact that Russia has historically viewed itself as a power broker in the Middle East, and that its lone Mediterranean naval base is located in Syria, the decision was not surprising. Soroka, George. February 11, 2016.

[158] Trenin, Dmitri. *The Revival of the Russian Military*. Foreign Affairs. April 18, 2016.

[159] Many Christians in Syria belong to the Antiochian Orthodox Church. Soroka, George. February 11, 2016.

[160] Trenin, Dmitri. April 18, 2016.

[161] Ibid.

[162] Hannah, John. *Russia's Middle East Offensive*. Foreign Policy. September 13, 2016.

[163] Ibid.

[164] Ibid.

[165] Lazarev, Egor and Biryukova, Anna. *Are Russia's 20 million Muslims seething about Putin bombing Syria?* The Washington Post. March 7, 2016.

[166] See Van Dam, Nikolaos. *The Struggle for Power in Syria* (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1996), especially chapter 9. Recommended in Terrill, W. Andrew. *Confronting the Islamic State: Understanding the Strengths and Vulnerabilities of ISIS*. Parameters 44(3) Autumn 2014.

[167] Haddad, Fanad. *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 89-116. Quoted in Recommended in Terrill, W. Andrew. Autumn 2014

[168] Ivshina, Olga. *Russia's Muslims divided over Syria Airstrikes*. BBC News.7 October 2015.

[169] A recent survey conducted by the department of sociology at the Anti-Corruption Foundation, a non-governmental organization in Russia, in Tatarstan and Dagestan gives us opinions from two major historical centers of Islam in Russia: the Volga Urals region (Tatarstan) and the North Caucasus (Dagestan). 24 percent of Muslims in Tatarstan and 22 percent in Dagestan oppose war in Syria. In addition, about 20 percent of the sample said that they were unsure about their opinion. About 40 percent of the respondents weren't sure what the conflict was about. Most important, only 6 percent of Dagestani Muslims see the Syrian war as a conflict between Sunnis and Shias. And only 3 percent of Tatar Muslims see it that way. About 25 percent of Tatar Muslims and 15 percent of Dagestani Muslims see the conflict as a fight against terrorists. Most Russian Muslims see it as a geopolitical conflict or as a fight against terrorism than as a sectarian divide. Lazarev, Egor and Biryukova, Anna. March 7, 2016.

[170] Salem, Paul and Malashenko, Alexey. April 12, 2013.

[171] Marvin Kalb, Marvin. November 2, 2015.

[172] Laqueur, Walter. November 1, 2009.

[173] Crews, Robert D. February 6, 2014.

[174] Salem, Paul and Malashenko, Alexey. April 12, 2013.

[175] Laruelle, Marlene. September 13, 2016.

[176] Malashenko, Alexei. 23 September 2014.

[177] Laruelle, Marlene. September 13, 2016.

[178] Crews, Robert D. February 6, 2014.

[179] Laruelle, Marlene. September 13, 2016.

[180] Tabatabai, Ariane M. *Saudi Arabia and Iran Face Off in Afghanistan. The Threat of a Proxy War*. Foreign Affairs. Wednesday, October 5, 2016.

[181] Mankoff, Jeffrey. *The South Caucasus Unfreezes*. Foreign Affairs. October 10, 2016.

[182] Tabatabai, Ariane M. October 5, 2016.

[183] Fayzullina, Karina. *Interpreting Russian policy and Islam*. Al-Jazeera Centre for Studies. 28 September 2014.

[184] Yarlykapov, Akhmet. 14 June 2016.

[185] Tabatabai, Ariane M. October 5, 2016.

[186] Yarlykapov, Akhmet. 14 June 2016.

[187] Sanders, Paul J. *Putin's Muslim family values*. Al Monitor. May 29, 2014.

[188] Ibid.

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